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Morale and Combat Performance: An Introduction

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# Morale and Combat Performance

## Introduction

What makes soldiers fight? This question has interested historians since the dawn of war itself. The contributions of anthropology, psychology and sociology to the study of combat in the twentieth century have greatly deepened our understanding of morale and combat motivation. The publication of John Keegan's seminal *The Face of Battle* in 1976, together with an upsurge of oral history, has stimulated a generation of scholarship on what Paul Kennedy has called 'war from below': individuals' experience of fighting.<sup>1</sup> As a result, we know better than ever before what put the average soldier in his slit trench and kept him there.<sup>2</sup> What remains poorly understood, however, is the connection between individuals' combat motivation, the morale of a unit or formation, and success and failure on the battlefield.

The articles gathered together in this special issue of the *Journal of Strategic Studies* are the product of a colloquium at King's College London in April 2011. The historians, sociologists and psychologists present were faced with a number of clear challenges. How should morale be defined? Can it be 'measured' or assessed accurately? How does morale fit into a holistic and nuanced understanding of what leads to success in battle and war more generally? The approach that emerged then, and that is presented in these articles, incorporates three main strands. First, the essays share a common concept of morale. Instead of associating morale solely or primarily with affective states (psychological orientations that are an expression of or dependent on emotions or feelings) or

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<sup>1</sup> John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London, 1976); Paul Kennedy, 'History from the Middle: The Case of the Second World War', *Journal of Military History* Vol. 74 (January 2010), p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Paul Addison, and Angus Calder, (eds.), *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West 1939-1945* (London, 1997); John Ellis, *The Sharp End: The Fighting Man in World War II* (London, 1993; first published 1980); Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (Oxford, 1985); John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, (London, 1986); Gerald F. Linderman, *The World Within War: American Combat Experience in World War II* (London, 1997); Sam C. Sarkessian (ed.), *Combat Effectiveness: Cohesion, Stress, and the Volunteer Military* (London, 1980); Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War: The Red Army 1939-45* (London, 2005); Mark Johnston, *Australian Soldiers and their Adversaries in World War II* (Cambridge, 2000); The 'Combat Morale' Special Edition of the *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2006).

group dynamics, they develop and explore a more comprehensive and functional understanding of morale that links it closely with motivation. Secondly, the essays tackle the problems of sources and methodologies. Too many assessments of morale rely on anecdotal evidence or a very limited number of accounts or sources. By making use of previously under-explored sources, such as censorship summaries of soldiers' mail and intelligence reports, the essays offer a broader assessment of morale. They identify an intricate web of factors that can be considered when studying morale. Some of these factors are primarily outcomes or correlates of morale (e.g, numbers of prisoners of war, rates of desertion, sickness and battle exhaustion). Others are influencers or determinants of morale (e.g. weapons, quality of manpower and the primary group). All are amenable to qualitative analysis; some, however, are also readily assessable by more quantitative approaches. By integrating qualitative and quantitative analysis of the many factors that are associated with morale, a detailed picture of the degree of good or bad morale emerges. Thirdly, the essays analyse the link between morale and combat performance. The more complete picture of morale that emerges from this methodological approach can be compared with known battlefield performance. This allows the development of a clear and supportable narrative plotting the relationship between morale and military outcomes.

These essays, therefore, provide a contribution to our understanding of morale in war. The methodology and approaches employed build on the work of other scholars<sup>3</sup> and offer a way of integrating morale into an analysis of combat performance and strategy. This, it is hoped, will help military practitioners, theorists and policy makers better understand the factors that lead to victory and defeat on the battlefield and in war more generally. Each author explores a case study from the two world wars and analyses to what extent morale can be considered an important factor in determining victory and defeat. Jonathan Fennell, by studying the North African campaign of the Second World War,

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, David French, "'Tommy is no soldier': The morale of the second British army in Normandy, June-August 1944' in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1996); John Buckley, *British Armour in the Normandy Campaign 1944* (Abingdon, 2004), Chapter Eight.

explores the relationship between morale and strategy. Vanda Wilcox explores the role of morale in the disaster that beset the Italian Army at Caporetto in 1917 and Jonathan Boff reassesses the part played by morale in the defeat of the German Army in late 1918 and the revolution that followed.

War, as these essays make clear, is a human endeavour. A critical analysis of the past, present and future must, therefore, fully engage with this reality. It is incumbent on scholars, practitioners and policy makers to develop methodologies and approaches to better understand the human component in war. Indeed, it is hoped that these essays make a contribution to that end. We would do well to consider again the words of S.L.A. Marshall,

We have come through another great war and its reality is already cloaked in the mists of peace. In the course of that war we learned anew that man is supreme, that it is the soldier who fights who wins battles, that fighting means using a weapon, and that it is the heart of man which controls this use.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire, The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (New York, 1966), p. 23.